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Saudi Success Deepens Dilem[illegible]

By David Ignatius and Gerald F. Seib

Saudi Arabia, the reticent oil kingdom, emerged this week as a credible military power in the Persian Gulf. That's probably good news for the U.S., since it reduces the likelihood that America will have to intervene in the Iran-Iraq War to protect Saudi oil fields.

But the surprising Saudi display of military prowess—in shooting down two Iranian jets on Tuesday—is bad news for Israel. And for the Saudis themselves, this week's episode signals the beginning of a dangerous new era that could threaten the kingdom's traditional foreign and domestic policies.

"This was a big psychological breakthrough for the Saudis," argues a leading Middle Eastern diplomat who is close to the kingdom. Before, he contends, the Saudis were simply "numb," paralyzed by the dangers of the long-running Persian Gulf war.

"The Saudis' confidence in their ability to use the modern weapons they have purchased received a big boost this week," agrees Richard Helms, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

By showing that they're not toothless; the Saudis have taken some pressure off the U.S. to send American air power to protect oil shipping in the Gulf. The question is whether the Saudis have the resolve to follow through on what they've started. The Saudis are considering, for example, whether to provide air cover for their weaker neighbor, Kuwait. The Iraqis also would like to draw the Saudis deeper into what they hope will become a collective Arab war against Iran.

One dogfight doesn't make an air force, and the Saudis aren't yet a regional superpower. A joke making the rounds at the State Department this week conveyed the continuing American skepticism about Saudi military capabilities. The joke had it that the Saudi pilot meant to press the "eject" button but pressed the "fire" button by mistake.

Mercedes vs. Model-T

Skeptics also can argue that this week's air combat says more about advances in American weaponry than about Saudi fighting skills. The Saudis have proven, above all, that the F-15, one of the world's most advanced jet fighters armed with sophisticated missiles, can shoot down F-4 fighters from a previous generation of hardware.

"Comparing an F-15 and an F-4 is like comparing a Mercedes and a Model-T," argues one Israeli official. "You can be a mediocre driver and still go very fast in a Mercedes."

But for all these quibbles, it's clear that when the Saudis decided to use their power, they did so quickly and efficiently. Two Iranian F-4 jets took off from an airfield at Bushehr, on the Persian Gulf coast, and headed for Saudi shipping lanes. When the planes reached an island called Arabiyah, about 40 miles off the Saudi coast—apparently hunting for oil tankers—Saudi F-15s moved in and downed the Iranians with two air-to-air missiles.

What gives the Saudis credibility is that they didn't wait for the Iranians to shoot first. U.S. sources in close contact with the Saudis say that some of the kingdom's leaders wanted to fire only after Iranian planes had attacked more ships, or at least had begun making threatening moves. But they lost out to others who argued against giving Iranian pilots time to make trouble.

For some U.S. officials, this week's action vindicates the Reagan administration's decision to provide advanced military hardware to the Saudis. During the bruising Senate fight over sale of Awacs radar-surveillance planes in 1981, the administration argued that they would be crucial in defending Saudi facilities in the sort of escalating Persian Gulf conflict that is now taking place.

The U.S., which hasn't yet delivered the Awacs the Saudis are buying, was a kind of back-seat driver during Tuesday's combat. American-operated Awacs tracked the Iranians as they took off from Bushehr and American refueling planes ensured that Saudi F-15s were in the air over the Gulf.

Congress, which has never been comfortable with the U.S.-Saudi military relationship, faces an awkward choice. Critics of the Awacs sale in 1981 argued that it made more sense for Americans to operate the radar planes rather than sell them outright to the Saudis. But now some in Congress are worried that American-operated radar and tanker planes put the U.S. too close to the Gulf war, and a few want to invoke the War Powers Resolution before the U.S. gets involved any deeper.

It will be hard, even for a skittish election-year Congress, to reverse the American role in defending the oil kingdom. Since 1950, Saudi Arabia has signed agreements to buy $25 billion of military equipment from the U.S. Besides the undelivered Awacs, it has purchased 62 F-15 fighters and about 100 F-5 fighters. The Saudis also have received sophisticated Aim 9-L air-to-air missiles and Maverick air-to-ground missiles.

Israel's growing worries about the Saudi military are likely to influence the American debate about selling additional weapons to the kingdom. Pro-Israeli lobbyists joke that they have had to switch their tactics during the last few days: Last week, notes one lobbyist, he was arguing that it didn't make sense to sell the Saudis advanced weapons because they would never use them in combat; this week, he is describing the Saudis as deadly military tacticians.

"We treat the Saudis' arsenal with respect," says a senior Israeli official. The Saudis aren't worrisome by themselves, this official notes, but they could pose a real danger in combination with well-armed Syrians and Iraqis, and perhaps the "sleeping" Egyptians.

"If the Saudi demonstration of military will continues, then we will have to think about direct Saudi involvement in the next Arab-Israeli war," this Israeli official warns. He adds: "In a multifront war, Saudi air power is a big threat."

Because of these Israeli worries, any new Saudi request for weapons probably would trigger strong objections from congressional supporters of Israel. For the moment, the administration is resisting Saudi pleas for F-15 bomb racks and other hardware, but if the kingdom is drawn deeper into conflict with Iran, pressure on the U.S. to sell more arms will grow.

The most delicate factor in the current Gulf crisis is its effect on Saudi Arabia itself. A near-feudal kingdom that has generally tried to solve problems by ignoring them or buying a peaceful solution suddenly finds itself facing the possibility of war with Iran.

Iranian retaliation is the biggest immediate danger. This week's combat proved that the Saudis probably can dominate Iran in the air. But the kingdom remains vulnerable to Iran's best weapon—terrorism.

Saudi officials are said to be concerned that Iran will respond with a seaborne terrorist attack, perhaps a kamikaze-style strike in which an explosives-laden speedboat tries to blow up a tanker. Inside the kingdom, security officials worry that some of the thousands of Moslem pilgrims visiting Mecca may be pro-Iranian agitators or terrorists.

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'Cries for Help'

The more you think about it, the quicker you come around to the conclusion that the real threat to U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf cannot be resolved by force of arms. It can be resolved, in the end, only by a negotiated resolution of the overriding conflict between Iran and Iraq. If that's accepted, the true magnitude of the current crisis becomes apparent. Nobody among the experts I've talked and listened to can say precisely what combination of diplomatic and economic pressures—what intricate dealings through which intermediaries—would be required to bring Iraq and Iran to a sensible settlement. But any number of authorities will tell you what could happen if the effort isn't made and the Iraq-Iran war continues.

At the very least, there will be more Iraqi and Iranian assaults on the oil lifeline. The Iraqis presumably are trying to weaken the Iranian economy and thus rob Iran of the wherewithal and the will to fight on. The Iranians want to achieve the same effect by punishing the Gulf states that bankroll Iraq's war effort. At current levels, these slices at the oil lifeline are more in the nature of demonstration shots. Much heavier chops, aimed at the oil fields and other facilities, would be needed to produce a genuine oil and energy crisis worldwide. But that would raise high risks of wider world involvement—for both sides, Iraq and Iran.

Hence the widely held theory that, almost certainly in the case of Iraq, but quite possibly in the case of Iran, what we are hearing in these Gulf tanker explosions are what the psychiatrists would call "cries for help." (With the emotionally disturbed, these cries can also take a seemingly senseless, violent form.) The ayatollah, to some, is crazy like a fox, and to others just crazy. But some experts insist there are forces in Iran that want to end the war. Casualty estimates run up to 600,000, in less than four years. The ayatollah has sworn he will accept nothing less than the end of the government of President Saddam Hussein in Iraq. But most experts doubt he can achieve that objective any time soon.

Iraq, on the other hand, not only has little chance of winning the war but is in no position to withstand a drawn-out war of attrition. In artillery, aircraft and tanks, Iraq has a decided edge—probably enough to stand off even a massive Iranian "final assault." But Iraq is not well fixed for a war of attrition, with a population of 14 million against Iran's 40 million.

There lies the U.S. dilemma. A stalemate invites further "cries for help" in the form of disruption of the Persian Gulf oil lifeline. Worse, the United States cannot win if either side loses. If Khomeini brings down the Iraqi government and carries his Islamic revolution to the Persian Gulf, the danger will be far greater to U.S. interests than the great Soviet menace that the Reagan administration keeps talking about. Former CIA director James Schlesinger would have us consider "whether the fall of Iraq is intolerable." But another former CIA director, Richard Helms, says that if Khomeini's revolutionary regime collapses, the Soviets "could be on the Strait of Hormuz, bing, just like that."

Those alternatives ought to be reason enough for intense diplomatic initiatives by the United States, through whatever middlemen, even while mustering allies and local friends to deal with the fallout of the Iraqi-Iranian war in the Persian Gulf.